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Rewriting the rules

THE ISSUE The Bush administration is asking Congress to give it authority to rewrite fuel economy standards for vehicles. Before Congress does that, the administration needs to say what those new standards will be.

Feeling the heat from motorists due to high gasoline prices, President Bush has asked Congress to give his administration authority to change fuel economy standards for vehicles. But with Bush's track record of not asking the auto industry to build vehicles that go farther on a gallon of gas, it's fair to question how serious the administration is on this vital area of conservation.

Of course, Congress can do much better than just authorize the administration to do what it wants to with the corporate average fuel economy, or CAFE, standards. Congress can mandate higher standards itself, and it should do so.

Many lawmakers are rightfully skeptical whether the Bush administration would raise standards. In his State of the Union address this year, the president talked about breaking the nation's addiction to foreign oil, but conservation hasn't been his focus. Instead, the president talked about developing alternative fuels, such as ethanol, and increasing drilling and refineries.

As far as CAFE standards, the administration already has the power to raise them (but not completely rewrite them) without additional authorization from Congress. Yet it proposed only a modest change for trucks and sport utility vehicles that would save less than one month of gasoline over a 20-year period. The president hasn't proposed any change in the fuel economy standards for cars.

The fear among some is the administration will create separate classes and rules for vehicles of different sizes that don't raise the fuel economy significantly. That would be a mistake and lost opportunity.

Technology exists for a major improvement in fuel economy for cars, trucks and SUVs. For much of the past two decades, though, improved technology has gone into producing more horsepower rather than better economy. The result is that today's fleet of cars and trucks get no better fuel economy than those of the 1980s. Meanwhile, CAFE standards are virtually the same as they were three decades ago.

Some in Congress propose the entire fleet of cars and light-duty trucks and SUVs be required to average 33 miles per gallon by 2015 (it's currently 27.5 for cars). Environmental groups want it bumped up to at least 40 mpg.

The Bush administration says it doesn't have a target. It needs one, especially before Congress gives it authority to rewrite the rules.